Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
Examining the Effects of Extreme Heat and Weather on Transportation
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Testimony of Travis Parsons
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and esteemed members of the Committee. My name is Travis Parsons, and I proudly serve as the Director of Occupational Safety and Health at the Laborers' Health & Safety Fund of North America, representing the common interests of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), their members, signatory employers, and affiliates. I am also a proud member of LIUNA Local 11. I have been at the Fund since 2002, and my primary areas of expertise are industrial hygiene, hazard awareness and correction, ergonomics, infection control, and overall jobsite safety. While I currently reside and work here in the Washington, D.C. area, I hail from a small town in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, and I am a graduate of West Virginia University. This background instilled in me a deep concern for the well-being of blue-collar workers, especially for their safety and health in the workplace.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this vital issue that affects our country's workforce and the health and safety of its laborers.

The Problem

Nationwide, we face a sobering reality that far too many workers lose their lives each year due to extreme heat, and many more are suffering from heat-related injuries and illnesses. [1] The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated. Extreme heat is on the rise, with record-breaking heat waves affecting millions of Americans every year. It is an alarming trend—each 1-degree Celsius increase in temperature leads to a 1% rise in workplace injuries [2], a significant concern when we consider the 162 million workers in our nation. [3]

Just last month, we witnessed Hawaii grappling with devastating wildfires, Louisiana declaring a heat emergency, and tropical storms reaching unprecedented locations such as California, Texas, and Puerto Rico. It is evident that extreme weather and heat are becoming an unfortunate and enduring reality.

Despite the alarming images of hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods, it is essential to note that extreme heat claims more lives than any other weather-related phenomenon.[4] The symptoms of heat stress can strike suddenly, often when it's too late to intervene. Prevention is our strongest defense. Prolonged exposure to elevated temperatures strains the heart, lungs, and kidneys, leading to chronic health conditions. Survivors of severe heat-related illnesses bear long-term health burdens, including muscle and organ damage, chronic kidney disease, and exacerbation of pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and cardiac disease.

The Cost

The economic impact of extreme heat is profound. Employers' failure to implement basic heat safety measures costs our economy billions of dollars annually.[5] These costs encompass absenteeism, reduced productivity, worker turnover, overtime, increased workers' compensation premiums, liability expenses, and equipment damage due to workplace incidents. Some may argue that providing additional rest breaks increases payroll expenses for employers. However, safer working conditions mean fewer injuries and illnesses, resulting in lower healthcare costs, reduced workers' compensation claims, and less time lost from work. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" rings especially true. Investing in heat-related illness prevention outweighs the costs of neglecting it. Increased breaks not only protect workers from heat stress but also enhance productivity, saving employers money.

The notion of a conflict between worker safety and business profitability is a false dichotomy. Ensuring heat hazard safety measures in the workplace is in everyone's best interest.

The Burden on Workers

Some of the most affected workers include those in construction, landscaping, and roadwork—members of LIUNA. It is imperative that we improve the tracking of heat-related illnesses and their impact on workers. Tragically, low-income workers and workers of color bear the brunt of these consequences. In construction, African-American workers experience heat-related deaths at a rate that's 51% higher than the average, and the death rate for Mexican-born workers is a

staggering 91% higher. [6] Workers' physical and mental capacities decline significantly as heat and humidity rise. Research reveals that worker productivity drops nearly 3% per degree Celsius when it is above 75°F. [7] In the end, it is not about temperature scales; it is about protecting workers.

A Blueprint for Solutions

We possess the knowledge to mitigate heat-related illnesses. While many employers adopt these strategies, regrettably, not all do. Embracing the mantra of "water/rest/shade" is a strong start. These measures, which are well-documented and easy to implement, reduce the risk of heat-related incidents. Workers require access to cool drinking water and adequate "cool down" breaks in shaded or air-conditioned areas. Moreover, the implementation of worker acclimatization protocols, a comprehensive written program, training for supervisors and frontline workers, emergency response procedures, and diligent record-keeping are all vital components of a comprehensive heat-related illness prevention program.

The right to a safe workplace is a fundamental human right, [8] exposure to excessive heat is one of the most pressing hazards facing workers today. Tens of thousands of workers suffer from heat illnesses, injuries, and fatalities yearly in the United States. Employers bear the responsibility to protect their workers. The people who build this nation, provide our food, and deliver essential goods deserve every safeguard available.

In conclusion, it is past time that we protect workers from heat-related illness, injury, and death. We must act decisively. The burden of occupational heat-related illness on the economy is substantial and growing. Neglecting the hazards of excessive heat for workers carries significant financial consequences for employers. However, we have manageable and cost-effective solutions at our disposal—solutions that safeguard workers and benefit employers alike. The choice is clear: invest in worker safety, protect lives, and secure a brighter future for all.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to addressing this pressing issue. I am open to any questions or discussions you may have on this critical matter.

Citations

[1] Fulcher, Boiling Point: OSHA Must Act Immediately to Protect Workers from Deadly Temperatures, Public Citizen (June 2022), https://www.citizen.org/article/boiling-point/ [herein after Fulcher, Boiling Point (June, 2022)].

[2] Syeda Hira Fatima, Paul Rothmore, Lynne C. Giles, Blesson M. Varghese and Peng Bi, Extreme Heat and Occupational Injuries in Different Climate Zones: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Epidemiological Evidence, 148 Environment International 106384 (March, 2021), https://bit.ly/3jGUEcL.

[3] Bureau of Labor Statistics. United States; August 2021 to August 2023; 16 years and older; full-time and part-time employees. https://www.statista.com/statistics/209123/seasonally-adjusted-monthly-number-of-employees-in-the-us/#:~:text=In%20August%202023%2C%20about%20161.48,employed%20in%20the%20United%20States.

[4] Jonathan Erdman, America's Top Weather Killer is Not Tornadoes, Flooding, Lightning or Hurricanes – It's Heat, The Weather Channel (June 21, 2022), https://weather.com/safety/heat/news/2021-06-03-heat-america-fatalities.

[5] Fulcher, The Cost of Inaction: The Failure of Employers to Mitigate the Effects of Heat Stress on Workers Causes Preventable Heat-related Illness, Injury and Fatalities and Costs the Economy Nearly $100 Billion Each Year, Public Citizen (Oct. 4, 2022), https://bit.ly/3WeMgTX. Research has shown that the optimal work environment for 100% productivity is between 59°F and 65% F.

[6] Fulcher, Boiling Point (2022), https://bit.ly/3tfFlff.

[7] Foster et al., Quantifying Impact of Heat on Work Capacity (2021).

[8] All about OSHA, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, OSHA 3302–02R 2023, https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/all_about_OSHA.pdf.